

Message Text

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ACTION EUR-12

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 CIAE-00 COME-00 EB-07 INR-07 LAB-04

NSAE-00 SIL-01 L-03 H-02 DODE-00 PA-01 USIA-06 PRS-01

SP-02 NSC-05 PM-04 /056 W
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R 111719Z FEB 76

FM AMEMBASSY LONDON

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 8910

INFO AMEMBASSY BONN

AMEMBASSY PARIS

AMCONSUL BELFAST

AMCONSUL EDINBURGH

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USMISSION NATO BRUSSELS

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 LONDON 02198

E.O. L1652: GDS

TAGS: PINT, ELAB, UK

SUBJECT: GOVERNMENT WINS ON DOCK BILL

SUMMARY: CONSERVATIVE PARTY EFFORT TO DEFEAT GOVERNMENT
ON CONTROVERSIAL DOCK WORK BILL LOST IN COMMONS VOTE FEB-
RUARY 10 WITH GOVERNMENT MARGIN OF 7-13 ON FOUR SEPARATE
DIVISIONS. CONSERVATIVES WERE JOINED BY LIBERALS, ULSTER
UNIONISTS, AND SCOT NATIONALISTS, BUT GOVERNMENT'S MAJORI-
TY WAS NEVER IN DOUBT. END SUMMARY.

1. VOTING IN HOUSE OF COMMONS THROUGHOUT EVENING OF FEB-
RUARY 10 CONFIRMED GOVERNMENT'S CONTROL OF PARLIAMENT
WITH MARGIN RANGING BETWEEN 7 AND 13. BILL AT ISSUE WAS
CONTROVERSIAL DOCK WORK REGULATION BILL WHICH WOULD EF-
FECTIVELY PUT ALL CARGO HANDLING ACTIVITIES WITHIN 5
MILES OF PORTS UNDER DOCK WORKERS UNION. BILL ITSELF
GAINED A SECOND READING IN COMMONS BY VOTE OF 312 TO 304.
THREE OTHER DIVISIONS ON ASPECTS OF THE BILL BROUGHT
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GOVERNMENT VICTORIES OF 7, 9, AND 13 VOTES.

2. GOVERNMENT DID NOT LOSE SUPPORT OF LABOR MPS, EVEN THOSE SUPPORTED BY SPECIFIC TRADE UNIONS WHICH HAD BEEN CRITICAL OF SOME ASPECTS OF THE BILL. ONLY DEFECTIONS ON GOVERNMENT SIDE WERE JOHN RYMAN, WHO HAS CONSISTENTLY REFUSED TO VOTE BECAUSE OF LEGAL COMPLICATIONS, AND ERRANT LABOR MP JOHN STONEHOUSE WHO VOTED WITH OPPOSITION ON ONE OCCASION AND ABSTAINED ON OTHERS. ONLY ONE LABOR MP WAS ABSENT THROUGH ILLNESS AND HIS VOTE WAS PAIRED WITH AILING LIBERAL MP.

3. WHILE GOVERNMENT COULD AND DID CLAIM THAT VOTING PATTERN DEMONSTRATED SOLIDARITY OF SUPPORT GOVERNMENT ENJOYS ON THE LABOR BENCHES, VOTE ALSO REPRESENTED ACHIEVEMENT BY CONSERVATIVE WHIPS WHO, ALMOST EXACTLY A YEAR AFTER ELECTION OF MARGARET THATCHER AS LEADER, PRODUCED HIGHEST NUMBER OF CONSERVATIVE VOTES IN HOUSE IN THIS SESSION. CONSERVATIVES CLAIM THAT ONLY TWO MPS WERE ABSENT, ONE SERIOUSLY ILL IN HOSPITAL AND ONE RECUPERATING OVERSEAS AFTER SERIOUS ACCIDENT. CONSERVATIVES CLAIM (ACTUAL VOTES NOT YET PUBLISHED) THAT MISSING VOTES IN PARLIAMENT WERE FROM MINORITY PARTIES (TWO WELSH NATIONALISTS, SOME ULSTER VOTES, SNP).

4. MICHAEL FOOT WOUND UP DEBATE FOR THE GOVERNMENT WITH BLAND STATEMENT THAT MEDIA CRITICISM WAS UNFAIR IN MISREPRESENTING TRUE IMPLICATIONS OF THE BILL. HIS REMARKS WERE AIMED AS MUCH TOWARD HIS OWN BACK BENCHES AS THE OPPOSITION, AND PRESS IS NOW SPECULATING THAT FOOT MADE A DEAL WITH THOSE PARTS OF THE TUC OPPOSED TO THE BILL: IN RETURN FOR TUC SUPPORT, FOOT AGREED TO AMENDMENT OF BILL IN LATER COMMITTEE STAGES.

5. COMMENT: WHILE CONSERVATIVE PERFORMANCE WAS ADMIRABLE,

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CONSERVATIVES DID NOT SUCCEED IN DEFEATING GOVERNMENT EVEN WITH SUPPORT OF OTHER OPPOSITION PARTIES. DECISION TO PULL OUT ALL STOPS (INCLUDING BRINGING BACK CONSERVATIVE MPS FROM STRASBOURG) WAS PERHAPS LARGELY TACTICAL DECISION TO REINFORCE THATCHER'S LEADERSHIP CLAIMS AND ACKNOWLEDGE LOYALTY OF CONSERVATIVE MPS TO HER. CONSERVATIVE CHALLENGE IS ALSO LOGICAL STEP IN RESPONSE TO CRITICISM WITHIN PARTY ABOUT THE INEFFECTIVENESS OF THE PARTY IN OPPOSITION. PICTURE OF CONSERVATIVE MPS VOTING ACTIVELY AGAINST GOVERNMENT, EVEN IF IN VAIN, PROBABLY GOES DOWN BETTER WITH PARTY AT LARGE THAN ABSTENTION POLICY RECENTLY FOLLOWED BY CONSERVATIVE MPS ON UNEMPLOYMENT DEBATE, ANTI-INFLATION MEASURES, ETC.

6. ARITHMETICALLY, HOWEVER, IN ORDER TO DEFEAT GOVERNMENT ON DOCK WORK BILL OR ANY OTHER BIT OF LEGISLATION, CONSERVATIVES WOULD NEED ONE-HUNDRED PERCENT SUPPORT
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WITHIN PARTY AND FROM OTHER MINORITY PARTIES, COMBINED WITH DEFECTIONS ON THE LABOR SIDE. ARITHMETIC CHANGES, OF COURSE, IF UP-COMING BY-ELECTIONS RESULT IN LABOR'S LOSING SEATS. IN THIS INSTANCE, HOWEVER, GOVERNMENT'S AUTHORITY WAS NEVER REALLY IN QUESTION IN SPITE OF SPECULATIONS BY THE PRESS AND POLITICAL LEADERS. GOVERNMENT CAN ALWAYS COUNT ON SOME ABSENTEES IN OPPOSITION AND MINORITY PARTIES. VOTE ALSO PROVES THAT, WHEN PRESSURE IN REALLY ON, MELLISH IS ABLE TO "WHIP" BACK BENCH INTO SUPPORTING GOVERNMENT.

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